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AUTHOR Wile, J. M.
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ABSTRACT

The portfolio procedures a teacher-educator uses in an undergraduate course in teaching reading in the elementary school have proven successful in helping students begin to articulate a philosophy of literacy instruction and assessment. The process also contributes additional benefits to students' levels of self-esteem, self-confidence, and their overall perception of the value of their teacher preparation program. The process is made up of identifiable phases, which can be described as introduction, clarification, organization, presentation, reflection, and evaluation. The teacher-educator used the process in two sections of students (approximately 60) enrolled in a course in methods of literacy instruction. As information pertaining to the portfolio procedure was collected, several patterns emerged: (1) students typically identified similar themes of key categories as they described the contents of their portfolios, but the students came away with distinctly personal notions about literacy education; (2) students' abilities to see connections between specific events and their personal development was an indicator of personal growth; (3) students were keenly aware of the progress they had made through the course; and (4) students increased their understanding of reflective portfolios and how these might be adapted to their own classrooms in the future. The process was intended as a scaffold to support students in the construction of a personally meaningful theoretical orientation towards literacy and literacy instruction. Students' evaluations of the course were considerably higher than similar evaluations for the same course offered the previous semester without a portfolio component. Contains four references. (RS)

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Using portfolios to enable undergraduate pre-service teachers to construct personal theories of literacy

by J. M. Wile, Ph.D.

Department of Teacher Education

Miami University

ED 380 766

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Teacher educators typically offer three reasons for implementing portfolios in the pre-service methods courses they teach: to assess their students'learning, to model an innovative assessment practice, to help university students engage more deeply in course content. I have come to conclude, however, that the objective of enabling students to construct individual philosophies of teaching ought to be the central focus of my own instruction and that a personal and professional portfolio is a fit scaffold to bringing about this goal. Actually, the effects of using portfolios to help students develop personal theories of literacy and literacy instruction are so dramatic that the experience achieves the goals of modelling practice and assessing student learning as well.

The syllabus for the undergraduate course in reading methods I teach highlights the development of a philosophy of instruction as a key course objective. The importance of developing a personal philosophy of instruction, is reinforced in textbooks used in such college courses in methods of literacy instruction which contain chapters devoted to explicating various theoretical orientations to literacy [Burns, Roe & Ross, 1992; Savage, 1994; Vacca, Vacca & Gove, 1991;]. As the authors of these texts suggest, the frameworks pre-service teachers develop are likely to serve as the foundation for future decision-making. As one author team explains,

> Teaching and learning alike require connecting the known to the unknown. Whether you are a pre-service or inservice teacher, we hope to make you think about your own belief system, and to show how your beliefs are connected to models, approaches, and instructional strategies. (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, pp. xvi)

University students are exposed to different theoretical perspectives through coursework, various readings, simulations, videotapes, and field experiences. They learn to characterize literacy instruction in terms of specific conceptual frameworks:

top-down, bottom-up, interactive, constructivist, behaviorist, eclectic, etc. However, the problem often becomes one of encouraging students to get beyond the mere identification of labels and to develop a personal meaning for the information they are acquiring.

As students progress through their final semesters of methods and supervised teaching, their understanding of the theoretical orientations is expected to clarify. And, by the time students complete their pre-service training, they are expected to be able to articulate their own coherent philosophies of literacy instruction.

This process of constructing a conceptual framework as a literacy teacher is part of the larger process through which undergraduates make a transition from that of being a student learning about teaching to becoming a teacher engaged in learning about learning.

It is the aim of teacher education programs to enable students to create personal theories of teaching and learning through the arrangement of coursework, readings, and field experiences. Unfortunately, many programs may be in danger of failing to achieve this goal for three reasons.

First, as novices, pre-service teachers may be inclined to focus on specific teaching strategies. Such information, while valuable, is procedural rather than theoretical. Second, as pre-service teachers understandably attend to specific strategies they may fail to see the connections among strategies or among other aspects of teacher decision-making. Third, as university students, some pre-service teachers may see the ideas presented in their preparation programs as content to be mastered rather than as valued and complex ideas to be grappled with and interpreted. The danger is that students may acquire only a superficial or trivial understanding of key theoretical orientation. When students are left on their own to construct their theoretical orientations the results may be less than satisfactory.

As a facilitator in this metamorphosis, I have found personal professional portfolios to be helpful in directing the development of such a conceptual framework. The unique nature of a personal portfolio contributes to this goal in several powerful ways. Portfolios can serve as warehouses or places for students to store insights, feelings and information accumulated over an extended period of time. Portfolios allow students to revisit key events and breakthroughs from new perspectives acquired as a result of experience and increased background knowledge. Portfolios also encourage students to reflect on their experiences over time and to see connections among what might otherwise appear as isolated ideas and events.

The portfolio procedures I use in my undergraduate course in teaching reading in the elementary school have proven successful in helping students begin to articulate a philosophy of literacy instruction and assessment. The process also contributes additional benefits to students' levels of self-esteem, self-confidence, and their overall perception of the value of their teacher preparation program.

Portfolio Procedures: Collecting Data

The portfolio procedure I use, like any form of authentic assessment, is an integral, on-going component of the course I teach. The process is made up of identifiable phases. These phases can be described as Introduction, Clarification, Organization, Presentation, Reflection, and Evaluation. Each phase is organized around specific tasks and objectives.

I introduce the portfolio during the first class meeting. I describe the portfolio as a component of the course. The course syllabus lists the portfolio as a required assignment, weighted in value to the equivalent of one examination. During the introduction, I present students with three rationales for requiring them to create and

maintain a personal/professional portfolio.

First, I mention that as portfolios are becoming commonplace in elementary schools, one of my goals is to provide them with first-hand experience with this form of data collection. A second objective, I explain, is to provide students with a place for them to store significant items they might create or collect through the semester as a result of their work preparing for class discussions, or through completing course assignments, or through their field experiences. We discuss ways in which showcase artifacts such as lesson plans, teaching units, and samples of students' work may be useful in obtaining a teaching job. I also point out that a collection of bibliographies, articles on teaching, and class notes might be handy in operating their own future classrooms.

I explain that a third objective is to provide an opportunity to view the semester not only holistically but from various perspectives and to reflect on the activities they experienced. I point out that the portfolio allows them to search for patterns in their own learning and professional growth.

These objectives present the portfolio activity as a meaningful task rather than a tedious, teacher-mandated assignment. To a large extent, students find value in each of these objectives. The importance of beginning with a notion of value is the foundation for the development of meaningful portfolios. What's interesting, however, is that often even those students who do not initially perceive the development and maintenance of a personal portfolio as a valuable task come to view the portfolio as meaningful as a result of their participation in this assignment. Because of their first-hand experiences, some students have even gone on to student teaching in the following semester with the intention of implementing personal portfolios in their classrooms.

During the introduction, I explain the data collection procedures. I explain that

the process is intentionally open-ended to capture the divergent nature of learning. I suggest some minimal guidelines for collecting artifacts. I point out that the artifacts they collect must reflect themselves as literate individuals, as literacy teachers, and their ideas about teaching in the elementary school. I contrast my notion of the reflective portfolio with traditional showcase portfolios associated with fine arts or with the process portfolios associated with writing.

A key distinction students find helpful is that not all the artifacts in their personal/professional portfolios need to be created by themselves. I make the analogy that a portfolio is similar to a scrapbook or travelogue. Much the same as we would not expect a traveler to create his or her own souvenirs, we might expect to see mementos created by others. Inevitably however, these artifacts, like treasured souvenirs, reflect some significant aspect of the student's experience and, in turn, some fundamental beliefs about literacy. Examples of this type of artifact might include favorite childhood books, inspirational poems about teaching, or samples of their students' work from a field experience.

I point out that since their portfolio is part of the course requirement, they will evaluate and score their own portfolios. I tell them I will furnish a scoring procedure if they choose not to develop a scoring procedure of their own. I explain that at the end of the course, that they will share the contents of their portfolios with a partner in the class. I review written reflective summaries they write about their portfolios, and not the actual portfolio.

I offer the students an initial operating strategy for collecting portfolio artifacts. I reiterate that while class portfolios may have common elements, no two portfolios should look alike, as these are intended to reflect the individual's personal experience. When students ask what sorts of items they might collect I simply suggest they collect first, then sort and discard if need be at a later time.

Following the introductory phase, students often demonstrate anxiety about the portfolio assignment, particularly if they have had little or no experience with portfolios. This feeling of uncertainty characterizes a phase I call clarification. Some students require several clarification of the purpose of the portfolio or the physical management of the items they are collecting. Other concerns focus on the types of artifacts to be collected. Questions are often aimed at clarifying the types of artifacts "the instructor is looking for."

While these questions might be taken as a reflection of students' preoccupation with grading or a reflection of the ambiguous nature of the directions I offer, the clarification phase may also reflect students' own clarification of their conceptual frameworks, their definitions of literacy and instruction, their values, their knowledge of professional issues and technical language. In short, the stage of clarification is an indicator of students' grappling with big (often ambiguous) ideas and concepts, details and experiences as they attempt to sort out or clarify their own values and beliefs through an emergent philosophical orientation to literacy development.

A series of group activities called portfolio shares provide occasions to explore boundaries, share professional language, and identify significant topics. I schedule four portfolio shares to occur at regular intervals over the sixteen-week course. I explain to students that the portfolio share is intended to achieve two goals. It is both an opportunity to compare their emergent portfolios with those of their peers and to exchange information about specific books, journal articles, magazine subscription offers, and other valuable artifacts they have begun to accumulate. I remind the students that each person must select from their portfolios one thing to share; that they must briefly identify the artifact and explain how it reflects some aspect of themselves as literate individuals or themselves as literacy teachers. This series of activities not only provides students an opportunity to check that their own conception of the

portfolio process is appropriate, it also leads students to explore new areas and to collect diverse items. A student who has been collecting bibliographies, for example, may become inspired to add professional articles, samples of children's writing, or their own writing after seeing the kinds of items presented by other students during a portfolio share.

Students continue to collect artifacts through their classroom and field experiences. Each item is dated as it is collected. Toward the end of the sixteen-week course we discuss ways they might organize the artifacts they have stored in their portfolios. This organizational task typically forces students to revisit events and experiences. The organizational task also forces students to see connections among the experiences rather than viewing them as isolated events.

Students may use whatever organizational strategy they deem appropriate. Typically students organize artifacts to reflect the order in which the events they represent occurred. Alternatively to sequential order, students might choose to organize artifacts by assigning them to categories according to the common topics or themes they represent.

Finally, each student writes a reflective summary of her or his portfolio. More than a simple inventory, the summary requires the student to analyze important categories, and to identify breakthrough discoveries or key shifts in personal beliefs which occurred during the semester. The student then uses specific artifacts to illustrate and support her or his analysis. The summary challenges students to reflect on the entire course. It offers them a place to step back and view their personal and professional development with multiple perspectives achieved across time.

At the conclusion of the course, students present their entire portfolio to a partner. This presentation not only enables students to celebrate sixteen week's of exploration and discovery, it also provides them with an authentic experience in

conducting a portfolio conference. I provide a broad guideline for conducting the portfolio conference. The conference has three aims. First, it is important for the student to provide a service as an attentive audience for the presenter. Feedback statements are meant to be non-judgmental, and merely reflecting the main ideas or themes the presenter has made through the portfolio presentation. The second aim, is to provide a source of evaluation. Here the student provides a comparative scoring for the presenter to ground his or her own self-evaluation. Third, the students plays a role in helping the presenter to set new goals by determining areas for future exploration and development.

Students are free to evaluate their portfolios in whatever fashion they find meaningful. I do require students to write an explanation of the evaluation system they use if they choose to devise their own analysis scheme. For students who choose not to develop their own evaluation system, I provide a model. The portfolio analysis plan that I present evaluates the student's portfolio along three criteria: thoroughness, comprehensiveness, and growth over time.

I explain that a portfolio may be considered thorough when the artifacts it contains reflect a broad range of topics relevant to their personal and professional development. While I leave the list of particular topics to their own determination, the notion of thoroughness implies that the process of becoming a professional educator entails more than the collection of a few teaching routines. The notion of thoroughness forces students to consider the question, "What should a teacher know?"

I explain that a portfolio may be comprehensive in the way that groups of artifacts elaborate a particular topic. For example, an article on cooperative learning may reflect a student's conception of a student-centered curriculum. Such an article by itself would be less comprehensive than the same topic represented by a collection of artifacts that included multiple professional articles, bibliographies, lesson plans for

cooperative activities, and classroom samples of students' work from cooperative learning tasks. This aspect of the portfolio is intended to answer questions such as , "How well have I represented my understanding of this theme?" and "What are the multiple implications of this theme?"

I explain that growth over time is reflected in several ways. Students may report an elaboration of their understanding. For example, students may be able to identify only a few instructional strategies at the beginning of the course but by the end of the course they can point to their awareness of a variety of strategies. Students also report significant shifts in their beliefs occurring over time. Students typically summarize such shifts as, "I used to think ____ but now I would be more likely to think _____." Students also comment that the portfolio provides evidence that the course experiences reinforced some existing beliefs. Some students point out that what they once valued based on intuitive or personal grounds, they were now able to support with appropriate rationales. These students often comment, "I always thought "____" was important, now I really understand why that is so."

Although I consider the quality of the students' reflective summaries the primary evaluation of the portfolios, I offer students a point system to facilitate their self-evaluation. I suggest that students use a thirty point rating system. Under this system they may give themselves a maximum of thirty points for the quality of their portfolio as measured along the criteria of thoroughness, comprehensiveness, and growth over time. Students need to give a separate score for each criterion while the composite may not exceed thirty points.

Although students generally give themselves the maximum points, the scoring tasks provides one more important opportunity for students revisit their experiences and reflect on their accomplishments as well as to set goals for new learning. That is, a student may review her portfolio and decide that while it may be limited in terms of

breadth, it does reflect a comprehensive understanding of some important themes. The same student may decide that based on a comparison of several artifacts within a topic, these artifacts represent significant growth over time. This student may rate her portfolio as follows: Thoroughness (5 points), Comprehensiveness (10 points), and Growth Over Time (15 points). While this scoring system encourages students to articulate and celebrate their personal and professional development, it also helps students identify areas which they need to explore further, perhaps during student teaching and as life-long learners.

Another student may observe that the artifacts in her portfolio evidence a thorough representation of key topics or themes in literacy and literacy instruction, however, she may also observe that none of the topics is comprehensively-developed. Such students may be divided on their assessment of growth over time. While the representation of basic issues evidences growth in the awareness of the field, it also may be that a lack of depth in any one topic or theme suggests only superficial understanding.

During the partner portfolio share, each student evaluates her partner's portfolio as well as her own. Students compare self-evaluations with their partners' evaluations. Typically, when students use the scoring plan I provide, ratings tend to converge. Individuals and partners are also encouraged to comment on the portfolio they evaluated. They are specifically asked to identify a "next step" for themselves and their partners. The "next-step" refers to goal-setting and the identification of areas to be explored in future learning.

Data Analysis

I recently used the portfolio process described above in two sections of students (approximately 60 students) enrolled in a course in methods of literacy instruction in

the elementary school. This required course, along with courses in children's literature and language arts methods, constitutes the literacy-related portion of the elementary education teacher preparation program.

As I collect information pertaining to this portfolio procedure and its effects on students, several interesting patterns have begun to emerge. The data have implications for three key concerns.

The first is in regard to the nature of the artifacts students collected and the themes they represented. I was interested to learn the extent to which students who ostensibly experienced the same course came away with personal notions about literacy education. I wanted to identify what the portfolios revealed about the way students incorporated course ideas and merged them with their own beliefs about teaching. I wondered to what extent I would find divergent interpretations across similar topics or themes. I reasoned that the unique and idiosyncratic ways students incorporated key concepts or explored important themes reflected their personal emergent philosophies as literacy teachers.

In fact, students typically identified similar themes or key categories as they described the contents of their portfolios. By collapsing overlapping categories the following general categories emerged from the data:

* Motivational/Inspirational Quotes
* Journals & Self-Assessments (reflections)
* Booklists/Children's Literature
* Teaching Ideas/Techniques/Strategies
* Lesson Plans/Field Assignments
* Professional Literature
* Students' Work
* Philosophy Development

* Sharing Books
* Teaching Resources

These themes reflect the course content and the literature-based approach to literacy education which dominated the course. None of the portfolios contained all of these categories. Instead students reacted on an individual basis to the course and often identified only four or five of the themes listed above. The categories they represented were evidence of a teaching philosophy in action. Just as students varied on the themes they selected for their portfolios, the items they selected to represent these themes varied from student to student even when describing the same themes such as teaching strategies, examples of children's literature, or specific professional literature.

The students were aware of the way the portfolios reflected their unique interpretation of themselves as literacy educators. One student introduced her portfolio by referring to the types of choices she made in selecting items to represent her ideas about literacy:

> In the beginning, the compiling of a portfolio meant something completely different than it does now. I had no idea of the things that I would choose to include or of the things that would naturally follow. I am pleased that at the end of one semester, I feel I have something that represents so much of what I believe to be true about reading education and education in general.

Often, students developed an interest in a specific category or theme. Given opportunities to make choices and to explore according to their interests some students opted to investigate certain areas in depth. For example, this student collected several lists of children's literature both as a future classroom resource and as a representation of her philosophy of instruction.

> ...these booklists have been collected throughout the entire semester.

> When I reflect on my growth as a teacher choosing children's literature I realize that while integrated in every subject reading becomes a tool to enjoy, learn, and help every student in different situations. I will use these lists in my classroom to enhance the selection I offer my students.

Not surprisingly, students combine theory with their interest in practical applications. As students browse texts, professional articles, videos of classroom teaching, and class presentations, they select teaching strategies and techniques which fit their theory of effective and authentic literacy instruction. This student's description her theory of instruction in terms of the notes and hand-outs she collected during the course was typical.

> This packet shows what I have learned this semester in our reading methods class. Before I entered the class my knowledge was minimal. Throughout the semester I have collected information on: emergent literacy, theories of reading, word strategies, vocabulary development, specific techniques to teach comprehension, informal reading inventories, professional literature and my responses. This has opened my eyes to many different reading programs that can be included in a classroom, and has given me the chance to develop my opinions and beliefs about teaching reading.

Implicit in this student's statement is the understanding that she was exposed to far more teaching activities than the ones she comments on here. The fact that she has selected these from the rest of her experiences as the most meaningful or valuable suggest the emergence of a discriminating pedagogical connoisseur. She knows what she likes, and she can tell you why.

The second concern was in regard to how well students made connections among the ideas and experiences represented in their portfolios. I expected that, much like schema-development, the ability to make connections between the known and the new, and between separate events or ideas would reflect an emergent theoretical or philosophical framework.

On one level, the students' ability to see connections between specific events and their personal development was a real indicator of personal growth. The

emergence and awareness of these connections demonstrated students' growth over the length of the semester. As one student wrote in her summary on the way the portfolio reflected her personal transition from student to teacher, she describes an item under the theme of professional development:

> I attended a literature conference. Last semester I might not have gone because I labeled myself as a student but this semester, as a teacher, I felt it would be beneficial to experience a conference where materials and ideas for teaching are discussed.

On a more sophisticated level, some students were able to make connections between a series of themes or concepts. They were able to see literacy ideas such as "authentic literacy" or "reading-writing relationships" played out in various ways. The following comment was typical of the sorts of connections students made not only between experiences within the course but between courses as well.

> I have broken this section into three parts. The first is actual children's literature books that I have loved over time and that have made an impact on my life. These books include Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson. I plan to share my love for this literature in my classroom. The second section is activities that relate to children's literature. I have included a bridge that I made in my Language arts course that represents friendships and bonds that is a follow-Our activity for Bridge to Terabithia. I have also included my notes from my children's literature class, which gives in-depth information about all types of children's literature.

The third concern was in regard to the extent to which the students found value in the course experiences as represented by the items in their portfolios. I reasoned that statements in which students expressed the attainment of personal meaning and a sense of achievement might be taken to reflect the values of an emergent philosophy of literacy instruction.

Students were keenly aware of the progress they had made through the course.

This is reflected not only in the rich variety of artifacts students were able to point to, but to the value they placed on these items. The reflective summary of this student typifies this aspect of professional development and the development of a philosophy of instruction.

> This section of my portfolio shows how my philosophy of reading has formed throughout the semester. I have included my four reading response articles. I have also included several other articles I have collected over the semester which express my philosophy of teaching. My articles cover the topics of journal writing, whole language, reading comprehension, Reading Recovery, emergent literacy and top-down reading methods. These are all topics that I feel strongly about and from my research in these areas I feel my philosophy has formed and structured."

Not incidentally, a fourth outcome of the portfolio process utilized in this course was the students' increased understanding of reflective portfolios and how these might be adapted to their own classrooms in the future. Students came away with a clear understanding of procedures for implementing portfolios, for directing their own students in ways of collecting and organizing artifacts, for conducting portfolio conferences, and for directing self-evaluation. In terms of the larger aims of this course for introducing pre-service teachers to the fundamentals of literacy instruction, this first-hand experience with portfolios turned out to be a powerful way to enable students to discover the portfolio as an instructional strategy.

Discussion

Unlike many contemporary applications of portfolios which rely on holistic scoring rubrics and fixed checklists, the process described here is aimed less at examination and grading and more of a forum for self-discovery and goal-setting (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991). The notion that the course instructor would evaluate

students' theories of literacy instruction would have been antithetical to the larger aim of this technique. Students' competencies were assessed and evaluated through the assignments they completed for course credit: lesson plans, article critiques, program evaluations, etc. To attempt to assign grades to students' portfolios (as a form of assessment) would likely have constricted students' choices and and the likelihood of risk-taking.

In fact, there was a real apprehension initially between grading and the portfolio. So strong is our tradition of assigning grades to student effort that both students and teachers tend to overlook or dismiss the possibility that self-motivation and personal engagement supersede the drive for grades. So strong was the self-interest and involvement in learning that I strongly suspect the students would have constructed similar portfolios without making it an "assignment" and course requirement. While this lent an initial aspect of legitimacy to the project, these preservice teachers eventually used the portfolios to celebrate their own transitions from students to teachers.

This process was intended as a scaffold, to support students in the construction of personally-meaningful theoretical orientations towards literacy and literacy instruction. How useful were the portfolios in enabling pre-service teachers to define their conceptual frameworks for literacy instruction? One student wrote in her reflective summary:

> Compiling and organizing my reading portfolio has given me the chance to review what we've learned and experienced throughout the semester. It has given me a sense of accomplishment, a reminder of the resources available to me as a teacher, and a reinforcement of my views and ability as both a reading teacher and general classroom teacher.

Not surprisingly, when students realize the progress they have made, when progress is captured visually in their portfolios, they perceive their efforts and their coursework

as valuable contributors to their professional development. Students' evaluations of this course were considerably higher than similar evaluations for the same course offered the previous semester without a portfolio component.

When asked to evaluate the course in terms of its helpfulness in preparing them as future teachers, students who constructed personal/professional portfolios rated the course 52 per cent higher than the group which did not construct personal portfolios. The use of a personal portfolio also contributed to students' perception of my overall effectiveness as a teacher. The portfolio groups rated my teaching effectiveness 31 per cent higher than the group which did not use a portfolio.

As students explored literacy education through this portfolio process, they experienced numerous opportunities to use professional language in meaningful and purposeful ways. As students described their portfolios they evidenced their comfort with "teacher talk." This talk went much deeper than the superficial acquaintance of education jargon of whole language, or basic skills, or constructivism. As students shared their portfolios, as they wrote their reflective summaries, and as they evaluated their own professional development they demonstrated that they had done more than learn about literacy teaching. They had begun to think as literacy teachers, because they were beginning to think of themselves as literacy teachers. I believe the professional portfolios not only captured this competency in ways in which no other assessment might have made clear. More important, I would suggest that the process of constructing, maintaining, organizing, and evaluating a portfolio contributed to this remarkable metamorphosis.

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